

These questions were submitted by members of the audience who attended the public forum “A Conversation with Our Muslim Neighbors about Islam” on February 4, 2016. The questions were compiled by the Needham Human Rights Committee and presented to the panelists. The Committee is indebted to Dr. Abdul Cader Asmal for his thoughtful responses, and wishes to thank the panelists for creating an opportunity for a *beginning* – and hopefully an *on-going* - conversation about Islam.

RESPONSES TO THE ISLAM FORUM

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General Questions

1. Is there a regional or national committee that has the authority to speak for Muslims in the United States?

There is no single regional or national authority that speaks for all Muslims. There are several, local, regional and national organizations that issue statements on behalf of Muslim groups but none of these can claim to be an ‘official’ voice of all Muslims. In the greater Boston area there are many mosques which have elected presidents, a Board and an Imam. Each has a designated spokesman for its own mosque. While many mosques or Islamic centers may have consensus on many issues there is nothing that binds them to hold a unanimous view. Clearly when it comes to combatting terrorism all have a consensus that this needs to be eradicated. Just exactly how it should be done is not agreed upon. While they may disagree amongst themselves on certain interpretational issues they all follow the basic creed of Islam. Those who espouse terrorism are outside the pale of Islam. Local mosques are many and include: the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland; The Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury; The Islamic Center of New England in Sharon and Quincy; The Society of Islamic Brotherhood in Roxbury and Masjid Al Quran in Dorchester. The Islamic Council of New England is an Umbrella for these and other centers: www.islamiccouncilne.org

2. How many Muslims live in Needham?

Unfortunately we do not have accurate statistics on the number of Muslims in Needham, as residents may attend any of the mosques listed above and there is no local Needham congregation.

3. Who are the Muslim leaders in our area?

The ‘Muslim leaders’ are those who represent the different Islamic centers or mosques, and may be the president in some or the Imam in another or the Executive Director. They ‘speak’ on behalf of their local communities with views that are generally representative of most centers.

4. What local mosques do Muslims in our area attend?

Needham Muslim residents may find it convenient to attend any of the mosques listed above or others in Allston, Burlington, Lowell or Methuen. As an aside, whereas attendance at a mosque is highly recommended for all Muslim males for the 5 daily prayers, because of the relatively few mosques and distances from Needham most Needham residents can practically only attend the obligatory Friday noon time prayer. The other prayers they can perform at home.

5. Most terrorists are Muslims. Why?

The first response to this question must be that most terrorists are not Muslims (Abdul Cader Asmal, "Terrorism is not Islamic": New York Times, Aug. 4, 2005). Unfortunately, it must be recognized that a certain number of acts of terrorism are committed by people who claim their actions are justified by Islam. In actuality, terrorism is totally antithetical to the principles of Islam, and, even if it were true that "most terrorists are Muslims", it is not because there is anything inherently violent in Islam. There may be many reasons why people resort to terrorism but no reason or pretext can justify vicarious retribution in Islam against innocent people of any religious faith. It is worth noting that many of the world's major religions have been used at various times throughout history as justification for acts of violence and terror. While Islam is, tragically, being used by a very small minority of hateful individuals to justify their actions, these current events are no more representative of the true core values of Islam than any other religious crusade throughout history has been of the core values of our other major world religions. It should also not be forgotten that the overwhelming majority of the victims of "Muslim terrorists" are Muslims themselves!

6. What is the difference between "Islam" and "Muslim"?

Islam is the name of the religion as is Christianity and Judaism. A Muslim is a person who follows the teachings of Islam in the same way that a Jew is a person who follows the teachings of Judaism and a Christian is one who follows the teachings of Christianity. It is important to remember that in the same way that we do not refer to any religion disparagingly such as 'Radical Christianity' or 'Radical Judaism' we should not refer to 'Radical Islam'. There is nothing radical about the religions - it is only the followers who are radical!

7. What is the difference between Sunni and Shia?

The Sunni Shia (Schism) developed after the death of Mohammed. The majority believed that his successor should be the most respected and capable person who worked closest with Mohammed in his lifetime. A minority believed that succession should be based on lineage. Those who opted for a 'democratic process' with the most qualified person for the succession came to be known as the Sunni; those who believed that succession should be linked to the

prophet's family came to be known as the 'Shia'. From this there developed certain theological differences that did not preclude mutual co-existence till recent times with the rise of Al Qaeda and more so Isis the Sunni Shia divide has led to brutal conflicts.

8. Are there Muslims who protest that Christian Arabs use the word "Allah" in their religious rites?

Historically Allah, which means God in Arabic, was used by all Arab speaking people who believed in the One God. Whether the likes of Isis, who claim a prerogative to understanding Islam, have criticized the use of this term by non-Muslims is something that is very likely. But then again they view most non-Isis Muslims as disbelievers anyway!

9. Are there atheist or agnostic Muslims?

You cannot be an agnostic or atheist and claim to be a Muslim. Belief in God is fundamental to the acceptance of Islam. Having said that Islam recognizes that there are many people who do not accept God as a reality and their outcome is in God's hands in the Hereafter. It is not up to Muslims to try to convert anyone to Islam or retaliate against them in any way for their personal choices.

10. ISIS has mastered marketing. Why do we not see counter marketing showing the falsehoods they advocate?

Isis has caught the 'Muslim world' and the global community flat-footed. Having started off as a rag-tag army of Saddam loyalists, criminals, disgruntled Iraqi Sunnis, and groups with some sort of psychiatric stress disorder with a unifying call of 'Islam' to conduct a 'jihad' against crusading invaders, they so quickly managed to conquer vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and designated *themselves* as a caliphate, that they were able to market themselves as the saviors of Islam from 'infidel forces'. (A caliphate is territory under the control of a caliph who is a Muslim religious-political leader. The caliphate ended in 1924 at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Isis has created a bogus caliphate that is not recognized by other Muslim countries.) It was their military successes as well as financial assets, and expert use of social media that allowed them to market themselves as the 'true face' of Islam. The fact that they butchered innocent civilians in their quest for a 'global caliphate' added appeal to potential recruits who were otherwise *dysfunctional*. While Muslim and western Governments have been preoccupied with identifying the root causes of radicalization, they have failed to launch a strong enough counter-offensive in defining terrorism as being totally against Islamic norms; that it is not an act of Jihad as promoted by the terrorists, and its destination is hell and not paradise. Such a message needs to resonate in all mosques throughout the world and reinforced by Western media. Unless the correct message of Islam is clearly and repeatedly broadcast we will not win the propaganda war against Isis and its ilk.

11. What percentage of those who consider themselves Muslim in the Middle East are moderates? What are they (moderates) doing to call attention to and callout extremists as being outside the tenets of Islam?

The Middle East is not a homogenous area. Currently there are large areas that are engaged in deadly warfare and people are barely able to survive. There are other areas run by dictators where dissent is crushed as an act of terror. When people are living under constant conditions of fear for their lives it becomes very difficult for them to express their views without the threat that they could be the next victims. It would be safe to say that as human beings who all crave basic safety and sustenance if we (Muslims and the global community) can restore some semblance of peace they will be able to develop a level of governance that conforms to accepted civilizational standards. It is easier for people living outside the war zone to denounce the demonic cults for what they are.

12. Did Mohammed during his lifetime spend more time on warfare and conversions rather than peace and tolerance of other religions?

Unlike the current perception and promotion of Islam as a violent and intolerant religion (largely due to the acts of heretical cults such as Isis), Islam has always celebrated our religious diversity as a gift from God. The following citations from the Quran and statements made by Prophet Mohammed attest to this:

- "O humankind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous", 49:13.
- "Those who believe, those who follow the Jewish scriptures, the Christians, the Sabeans, and any who believe in God and the Final Day, and do good, all shall have their reward with their Lord and they will not come to fear or grief", 5:69
- "There is no compulsion in religion", Quran 2:226
- "The guiding of them is not your duty Mohammed, But Allah guides whom He wills", 2:272.
- "He who hurts a non-Muslim citizen of a Muslim state, I am his adversary, and I shall be his adversary on the Day of Judgment "(Prophet Mohammed reported by Bukhari).
- "He who wrongs a Jew or a Christian will have myself as his indicter on the Day of Judgment".

Questions about Islamic Law

1. For mainstream US Muslims, which comes first: Islamic Law or US/local law?

For any Muslim living in any country his primary obligation is to live by the laws of the land. If he finds that there is irreconcilability between the laws of a particular land and his

requirements to fulfil his Islamic obligations - i.e. he is forbidden to practice his religion, then he should move to a country where he can freely practice his religion. In the US the practice of Islam is in no way constrained by the Constitution. In certain circumstances Muslims may wish to be regulated by Shariah law in matters of a personal nature where there is no conflict with the laws of the land. But this is not a necessity.

2. What is Sharia Law and Islam?

Shariah is a personal code of conduct that provides guidance to Muslims on how to conduct their private lives and for the public good. It is based on what the Quran states, the teachings and examples of Prophet Mohammed, and community consensus. In Muslim countries it is codified to provide answers for everyday living. And in some Muslim countries there are judges who dispense justice based on Shariah. Muslims living in a country where they are a minority are obligated to follow the law of the land except in so far as the law of the land is able to accommodate elements of Shariah as it pertains to Muslims only.

3. How do you explain the concept of Taqiya in the Quran? How is it used in modern times?

Taqiyya is a term that is being deliberately distorted to take on a meaning it does not have. The original understanding of the expression was that under the pain of death a Muslim was permitted to lie about his religion so as to avoid being killed. Currently it is used to imply that a Muslim can lie under any circumstances and especially if he wants to convince others that he is not a Muslim so that he can gain authority for the future benefit of Muslims.

4. Are there movements to reform segments of Islamic law?

Islamic Law is based essentially on four sources: The Quran, The Hadith (the statements of the Prophet), Consensus, and Analogical Reasoning. Quranic decrees are considered immutable, but have to be considered in their proper context – some are timeless and others are of historical context. Scholars still debate what were relevant then and what are relevant now. The heretics deliberately select those even when completely out of context that suit their agenda. The other three sources are more amenable to interpretation. With regard to reformation there are groups actively re-interpreting Islamic Law so as to bring it into alignment with International Law; there are other groups that forbid any reformation.

5. Many Americans think that the hijab is a sign of oppression, and that Muslim women do not have equal status (e.g., no women are Imams, they must stand behind men in the mosque, they are encouraged or required to conform to dress codes). What does Islam say about the role of women?

There are many misconceptions about the status of women in Islam.

With regard to the wearing of a hijab (head cover only; or niqab – where the face is covered but the eyes are uncovered; or burqa where the entire face is covered by a veil), there are differences of opinion as to whether the minimum of a hijab is needed. The debate is

unresolved. In some societies it is the traditional norm to wear a hijab in others it is optional, and in Turkey until recently it was banned. In Jordan it is not unusual to see women with and without hijab side by side. In the US there is a similar tradition. While in some families the wearing of hijab may be strictly encouraged, in many others women from a young age feel a sense of pride if not empowerment in wearing a hijab. To such women a hijab is a source of pride and a religious obligation they resist to give up. All Muslims agree that whether a hijab is worn or not the clothing for both men and women should be 'modest'.

With regard to the gender roles in Islam the view is that this should be a complementary one focused on raising the family. The role of the male is to go out to work and be the bread winner so that the wife can stay at home and nurture the children. She is not prevented from working or studying if she can find a substitute to take care of her children. As a corollary of this whatever she earns she is entitled to keep as her own, unless she needs to reimburse her 'nanny'.

While a man is designated as the head of the household because of his responsibility to maintain his family, with regard to spirituality men and women are equal in the eyes of God and are subject to identical justice for their good and bad deeds. While women are encouraged to take care of household chores there is nothing that prevents them from educating themselves to the highest level they can attain and the most important jobs they can aspire to. Thus Muslim women have been Prime Ministers of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

As in some other faith traditions that preclude women from priesthood, Muslim women cannot be Imams leading a prayer for men and women. The essential reason for this is that it is obligatory for men to pray in a mosque (more practicable in Muslim majority countries where mosques are within walking distances). Women's prayers at home have the same value as do men's prayers in a mosque. Because congregational prayers are obligatory for men but not for women, men lead the prayers. The fact that when women do come to pray in the mosque and form lanes behind the men, is not to signify any sense of inferiority. It is simply a consequence of the fact that Islam discourages the intermingling of the sexes, and therefore strange men and women could not occupy positions next to one another in prayer. The fact that spiritually men and women are equal in Islam, and they have complementary roles in society, has not prevented Muslim societies from being patriarchal and male chauvinistic! If Muslim women are oppressed it is despite Islamic teachings!

Questions Related to Images and Perspectives of Muslims

1. Why do young Muslim men and women, such as the couple in California, become terrorists and suicide bombers? Are they motivated by sources in the Quran?

There are no inherent traits that indicate a predisposition to terrorism, nor are there reliable profiles of those who have undergone radicalization. There is absolutely nothing in the Quran or the teachings of the prophet that promotes terrorism. On the contrary Islam as a matter of

its basic principle forbids the killing of innocent people. Individuals or groups, for a variety of pretexts or because of psychiatric problems, may seek to justify their actions by claiming that they are conducting a 'jihad' against those who are anti-Muslim. Such an argument is invalid for two reasons: terrorism is not jihad, and the vicarious killing of individuals is impermissible in Islam. While one may begin to understand (but never justify) the actions of some who lost their families in Iraq, or those with a psychopathic personality or a criminal mind who want to perpetrate something evil and think that he can justify it through Islam, nothing can begin to explain what kind of demons motivated the San Bernadino couple to slay innocent co-workers any more than one can explain the actions of Dylan Roof in a Church.

2. What ideology drives these people to destroy themselves as they inflict death and injury to scores of innocent people?

Suicide is a major sin in Islam as is the killing of innocent people. People who commit both these sins have a totally distorted sense of Islamic beliefs. Such beliefs have originated in the minds of Muslim heretics who are outside the pale of Islam. If Islam had a mechanism of excommunication, such heretics and their followers would be excommunicated.

3. What characteristics are common to Muslim extremists?

There are no characteristics by which terrorists can be profiled. Some may preach a rigid and intolerant version of Islam but this does not guarantee that they would resort to violence. Others may be nominal Muslims who given an opportunity to vindicate a grievance, as for example with the ghettoized Parisian Muslims, may seek a solution for their deep resentment by resorting to acts of mindless terror which they attempt to rationalize as acts of jihad.

4. Why do Muslims resist discussions about Islamophobia? What is an "Islamophobe"?

An Islamophobe is a person who has an irrational fear and a pathological hatred of Islam and goes about promoting such sentiments as though they were based on fact. The objective is to spread suspicion and hostility among the well intentioned general population who are anxious because of the actions of terrorists and deeply confounded by the propaganda of the Islamophobes. Muslims do not resist discussions about Islamophobia. On the contrary they try to expose the real Islamophobes as hate-mongers who have an anti-Islamic agenda for a variety of reasons and who exploit the actions of terrorists as though these represent the intention of all Muslims and have authentication in Islam.

5. How should a Muslim respond to Islamophobic actions and questions in a way that projects a good image for Islam, as well as answers their questions?

Islamophobes are professionally well-trained in the art of presenting their lies, half-truths and innuendoes. To engage them in a productive debate is difficult because it immediately places

the Muslim protagonist in a 'defensive position'. Unlike ordinary people who have an open mind and are anxious to learn the truth about Islam from Muslims, the Islamophobes have no interest in the truth which they know is contrary to the line they wish to peddle. Ideally it would be best to allow professional Muslim scholars to debate the Islamophobes. However as there are so many misconceptions about Islam that Muslim activists, who are not professionally trained, are called upon to educate the general public; but they may not be adequately skilled to take on the professional Islamophobes. Given the fact that most 'concerned' compatriots are not Islamophobes but just need to understand the basic facts about Islam and someone to explain the confounding signals from both the terrorists and the Islamophobes. It just needs honest well-intentioned Muslims from the community to speak the truth about Islam. This is what we did in Needham.